

Fruit bats.

In April, a month into our first lockdown, a local politician called for the removal of the local fruit bat population. According to his constituents, two dead fruit bats had been found on the street, raising concerns of bat-to-human disease transmission, a fear heightened in light of Covid. 'The bats are too close to humans', he said. He was not adverse to a cull.

In 2003 around 30,000 Grey-headed flying foxes, or Melbourne's native fruit bats, had already been relocated from their first colony in the city's Botanic Gardens. Volunteers banged pots and drums for eight solid months, deterring the bats from settling amongst the rare trees. They eventually moved on, landing in their current colony amongst the river red gums, next to the Yarra River.

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In May I signed up for a socially-distanced drawing project. The materials arrived, requiring me to race up the creek with paper and pastels to take rubbings my favourite tree. My housemate, a fellow tree lover, came with me despite the cold and impending winter evening. In a westerly wind we managed to take two rubbings from my favourite eucalypt (or maybe corymbia, it remains unknown) whose roots reach the water.

As the sky darkened we turned to make it back home. We walked in short shrift along the waterway, glancing sideways at the low oak whose limbs hold children in the daytime, but has seen violent acts in the night. By 5.45pm we noticed the inky sky and knew, once dark, this green corridor becomes the realm of wildlife and men. We had to make a decision: through the black whispering casuarinas where it is faster but unlit, or the paved side of the creek that takes longer? Both of us knew the creek extremely well and opted for the trees, taking the punt that it's safer in lockdown.

6pm had us under a full moon that guided us through a grove of gums. Moving into a clearing we spotted V-shaped shadows, travelling along the ground toward us. Above our heads was a steady stream fruit bats, littering the sky before feeding from the tops of the nearby trees. The moon, exceedingly bright in the midwinter cold, hit their leathery wings making them appear silver. We stopped for a moment, forgetting our gender, mouths agape at this spectacle of freedom at night.

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That politician wanted to eliminate the bats like the dark eliminates women.

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Throughout these months I have frequently found myself battling the creeping ennui that exists in lockdown. In the studio it plays out as a contest with myself – though my weapons are somewhat blunt, consisting of ink, paper and cotton wool. Layer upon layer upon layer I build up the countless nights that I have spent walking around the inner north, pent up and aimless, feeling more vulnerable to myself than as a solo female walking.

In here I fall back on that old adage; make what you know. The prints coming out on the press recreate the sense of looking up through a gap in the canopy of trees, marvelling, not for the first time, at how every night the fruit bats seem to know where to go.

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Fruit bats create a certain fixation. On a chilly June evening we put on our warmest and jumped in the car, heading eastward toward Bellbird Park. Working in indigenous revegetation, my housemate knew all the spots, driving us down the spiralling road in the middle of the city. From here the skyscrapers stood in their Covid cleanliness, sharp and glittery from the lack of pollution.

We parked away from the other cars with their dubious steamy windows, and snuck out onto the path to the north. It was early but already dark, the canopy of gum trees soft against the orange glow of the city sky. Absent, however, were the hanging cocoons of bats. We checked the time: 6.30pm! They were halfway over the northern suburbs by now.

We decided to keep walking anyway, unable to resist the liberty of a night walk during lockdown. With everything a silhouette and no moon to speak of, we negotiated the path with wide eyes, noting the stench of guano rising up from the ground. Old river red gums, home to the absent bats, reflected on the river. Water, I remembered reading, was one of the last things to lose the light at night.

Suddenly a slim form loped around the corner. We froze. A tall man staggered down the narrow path, underdressed for the chill of the evening. Upon seeing us, he slipped into the acacia, making way for us to pass. I sucked in my breath and kicked myself for swapping my jacket, leaving me without my usual Stanley knife in the right hand pocket.

Approaching the man, I could see his body lolling, unable to balance in the task of standing still. He's high, I realised, and hopefully harmless, and we quickly stepped by muttering a reluctant thanks, as if he had done us a favour. Holding his white t-shirt in my periphery, we strode back up the path, fuelled by fright and quietly furious that even a Wednesday night in an empty bat colony was not free from the unknown intentions of men.

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On a mild September night I find myself walking, turning over the same, familiar anxieties. So much of my world has adapted to limits, narrowing movements, connections and curfews. Glancing up at the steady, silent passage of black, I realise I don't know what time the bats return home.